



# Trace-positive non-commutative polynomials

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# SOME EXAMPLES OF TRACE-POSITIVE QUATERNARY QUARTICS

RONAN QUAREZ

ABSTRACT. We give some examples of trace-positive non-commutative quaternary quartics which are not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares. Since some similar examples of ternary sextics were already known, this settles a perfect analogy to Hilbert's results from the commutative context which says that in general, positive (commutative) polynomials are not necessarily sums of squares, the first non trivial cases being obtained for ternary sextics and quaternary quartics.

## INTRODUCTION

Interests in study of non-negative polynomials and sums of squares go back to Hilbert and its famous 17-th problem.

At the end of the 19th century, Hilbert showed ([Hi]) that  $f \in \mathbb{R}[x, y, z]$  a homogeneous polynomial of even degree  $d$  in  $n$  variables over the reals which is non-negative on  $\mathbb{R}^n$ , necessarily is a sum of squares in  $\mathbb{R}[x, y, z]$  if and only if  $n \leq 2$  or  $d \leq 2$  or  $(n, d) = (3, 4)$ .

Hence, in general, positive polynomials are not necessarily sums of squares, the first non trivial cases are obtained  $(n, d) = (3, 6)$  and  $(n, d) = (4, 4)$ . Supprisingly, explicit counterexamples in that former cases only appeared much later. The most celebrated explicit counter-example being the Motzkin polynomial [Mo]:

$$m = z^6 + x^2y^4 + y^2x^4 - 6x^2y^2z^2.$$

Other examples follows in the 1970's, and for instance due to [CL] the following quaternary quartics is non-negative but not a sum of squares:

$$q = w^4 + x^2y^2 + x^2z^2 + y^2z^2 - 4xyzw.$$

Our goal is to study the generalization of theses notions when positivity is considered when evaluating at operators rather than real numbers. Namely, we may distinguish several different kinds of positivity than generalize the usual positivity of polynomials in commuting variables: namely matrix-positivity and trace-positivity.

A symmetric polynomial is matrix-positive if  $F(A)$  is positive semidefinite for all  $t$ -uple of symmetric matrices of same size. Beware that to give sense to this evaluation we have to take  $F$  in the  $\mathbb{R}$ -algebra of polynomials in *non-commuting* variables

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denoted by  $\mathbb{R}\langle X_1, \dots, X_n \rangle$ . More precisely  $\mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  is the monoid ring of  $\langle X_1, \dots, X_n \rangle$  over  $\mathbb{R}$  which is freely generated by the  $n$  non-commuting letters  $(X_1, \dots, X_n)$ .

Likewise, for trace-positivity: a polynomial  $F \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  is trace-positive if the trace of  $F(A)$  is non-negative for all tuples  $A$  of symmetric matrices of same sizes.

These two notions of positivity for non-commutative polynomials are connected but they describe different sets of polynomials.

A result by [He] says that a matrix-positive non-commutative polynomial  $F$  is a sum of *hermitian* squares, which means that  $F$  can be written as an  $\mathbb{R}$ -linear combination of polynomials of the kind  $P^*P$ , where we endow  $\mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  the  $\mathbb{R}$ -algebra involution  $*$  that satisfies  $(X_i X_j)^* = X_j X_i$ . Note that this involution is compatible with the matrix transpose.

Concerning trace-positive polynomials, their investigation and the question of when they can be written as a sum of hermitian squares and commutators of polynomials is motivated by the connection to two famous conjectures: the BMV conjecture from statistical quantum mechanics and the embedding conjecture of Alain Connes concerning von Neumann algebras (see [Bu] for details).

It has been proved [Bu, Theorem 1.11] the tracial analog of Hilbert's result on bivariate quartic polynomials. Namely: any bivariate trace-positive polynomial of degree at most four has such a representation. Whereas this is false in general if the degree is at least six. One has some examples of polynomials which are trace-positive but not a sum of hermitian squares and commutators. For instance the non-commutative version of the Motzkin polynomial:

$$M = 1 + X^2 Y^4 + Y^2 X^4 - 6 X^2 Y^2.$$

This is in perfect analogy to Hilbert's results from the commutative context.

Note that there is still some difference with the commutative case. First, the polynomial  $M$  is a non homogeneous non-commutative version of  $m$ . Indeed, Hilbert results about forms has completely obvious equivalent version for (non-homogeneous) polynomials. But for non-commutative polynomials, the homogenization operation is even not well defined.

Second, there was not known any example of trace-positive polynomial of degree 4 in 3 variables which is not a sum of hermitian squares and commutators.

We focus on this case, considering the following non-commutative deshomogenized version of  $q$ :

$$Q = 1 + X^2 Y^2 + X^2 Z^2 + Y^2 Z^2 - 4XYZ.$$

Since it is not a sum of squares when we view it in the commutative world, it cannot be a sum of hermitian squares plus commutators in  $\mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z \rangle$ . We prove in Theorem 3.4 that it is trace positive by constructing an identity with denominators coming from commutative forms.

In the last section, we present a general process to obtain trace-positive polynomials (and also trace-positive forms) which are not sum of hermitian squares and commutators. But this process assume an hypothesis known as the *degree bounds conjecture* for trace-positivity. Let us mention that this conjecture is related to the algebraic formulation of Connes's embedding conjecture as formulated in [KS].

## 1. PRELIMINARIES

The ring of polynomials in  $n$  commuting variables  $x = (x_1, \dots, x_n)$  is denoted by  $\mathbb{R}[x]$ . We denote by  $\langle X \rangle$  the monoid which is freely generated by the  $n$  non-commuting letters  $X = (X_1, \dots, X_n)$ . Let  $\mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  denote the monoid ring of  $\langle X \rangle$  over  $\mathbb{R}$ . That is, the elements  $F$  of  $\mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  are polynomials in the non-commuting variables  $X_1, \dots, X_n$  with coefficients in  $\mathbb{R}$ , i.e. we may write non-commutative polynomials  $F \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  as

$$F = \sum_{w \in \langle X \rangle} a_w w \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$$

with  $a_w \in \mathbb{R}$ .

Let  $\hat{\cdot} : \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle \rightarrow \mathbb{R}[x]$  be the algebra homomorphism mapping each  $X_i$  to the commuting variable  $x_i$ . The image  $\hat{F} \in \mathbb{R}[x]$  of a given polynomial  $F \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  is called the *commutative collapse* of  $F$ .

Instead of evaluating a polynomial  $F \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  in tuples of real numbers resulting in a real number we substitute  $X$  by tuples  $A = (A_1, \dots, A_n)$  of symmetric matrices of same sizes. We endow  $\mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  the  $\mathbb{R}$ -algebra involution  $*$  :  $\mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle \rightarrow \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$ ,  $P \mapsto P^*$  that satisfies  $(X_i X_j)^* = X_j X_i$ . This involution is compatible with the matrix transpose, i.e.  $F^*(A) = F(A)^T$  for all tuples  $A$  of symmetric matrices of the same size. A polynomial  $F \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  is *symmetric* if  $F^* = F$ .

We say that  $F$  is a sum of *hermitian squares* if  $F$  can be writtent as an  $\mathbb{R}$ -linear combination of polynomials of the kind  $P^* P$ .

A polynomial  $F \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  is trace-positive if  $\text{Tr}(F(A)) \geq 0$  for all tuples  $A$  of symmetric matrices of same sizes, where  $\text{Tr}$  denotes the normalized trace of the canonical matricial trace  $\text{tr}$  (namely  $\text{Tr}(A) = \frac{\text{tr}(A)}{d}$  when  $A \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ ).

Of course, if  $F$  is trace-positive, then  $\hat{F}$  is positive. However the converse implication does not hold in general.

Since we are interested in the class of trace-positive polynomials, we endow the free algebra  $\mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  with an equivalence relation to model the invariance of the trace under cyclic permutations. Namely, we say that two polynomials  $F, G \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$  are cyclically equivalent ( $F \sim G$ ) if  $F - G$  is a sum of commutators (elements of the form  $[p, q] = pq - qp$  for  $p, q \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$ ).

See [Bu] for more context about non-commutative polynomials.

## 2. A POSITIVE SEMI-DEFINITE FORM WHICH IS NOT A SUM OF SQUARES

Let us consider the following form in  $\mathbb{R}[x]$ :

$$q = w^4 + x^2 y^2 + x^2 z^2 + y^2 z^2 - 4xyzw.$$

An easy computation (see [CL]) shows that  $q$  is not a sum of squares in  $\mathbb{R}[x]$ . Let us show now 4 different methods or algebraic certificates showing that  $q$  is a positive form.

**2.1. The arithmetico-geometric inequality.** An easy application of the arithmetico-geometric inequality yields:

$$\frac{1 + x^2 y^2 + x^2 z^2 + y^2 z^2}{4} \geq \sqrt[4]{x^2 y^2 x^2 z^2 y^2 z^2} = xyz,$$

for  $x \geq 0, y \geq 0, z \geq 0$ . The other cases of signs for  $x, y, z$  are either obvious or reduce easily to this former case (up to multiplying some variables by  $-1$ ).

**2.2. Comparison to the unity.** We have the identity:

$$q = (xy - z)^2 + (xz - y)^2 - y^2 - z^2 + 1 + y^2 z^2 = (xy - z)^2 + (xz - y)^2 - (1 - y^2)(1 - z^2),$$

which proves the positivity when  $y^2 \leq 1, z^2 \leq 1$  or  $y^2 \geq 1, z^2 \geq 1$ . Note that this last condition is always satisfied up to permuting the variables  $x, y, z$ .

**2.3. Substitution with odd powers.** Another possibility would be to show that  $q(x^3, y^3, z^3)$  is a sum of squares. The computer algebra system SOSTOOLS answers that it is the case. This device use the powerfull techniques of interior points method to show the feasibility of a Semi-Definite programm which is the translation of our sum of squares problem. Unfortunately, it is not clear how to write down an explicit and “simple” sum of squares expressions since the number of monomials appearing in each squares is about 84.

**2.4. Identity with denominator.** It is known from Artin’s Theorem that  $q$  is a sum of squares of rational functions. One may exhibit such an identity with a “simple” denominator:

$$q(x, y, z)(1 + x^2) = (1 - xyz)^2 + (yz - x)^2 + (x^2 y - xz)^2 + (x^2 z - xy)^2$$

which obviously gives a certificate of positivity for  $q$ .

Let us see now if it is possible to extend to non-commutative liftings of  $q$  some of the previous arguments of this section.

### 3. NON-COMMUTATIVE LIFTINGS

In the non-commutative ring of free generated polynomials  $\mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z, W \rangle$ , one may now consider the following lifting of the form  $q$ :

$$Q_0 = W^4 + X^2 Y^2 + X^2 Z^2 + Y^2 Z^2 - 4XYZW.$$

It is not trace-positive: indeed if

$$A = \begin{pmatrix} 2 & -2 \\ -2 & 0 \end{pmatrix} \quad B = \begin{pmatrix} -2 & -1 \\ -1 & 2 \end{pmatrix} \quad C = \begin{pmatrix} -2 & -2 \\ -2 & -2 \end{pmatrix} \quad D = \begin{pmatrix} 2 & 0 \\ 0 & -2 \end{pmatrix},$$

then

$$\text{Tr}(Q_0(A, B, C, D)) = -20.$$

*Remark 3.1.* Even the symmetrized version

$$W^4 + X^2 Y^2 + X^2 Z^2 + Y^2 Z^2 - \frac{2}{3}(XYZW + XYWZ + XZYW + XZWY + XWYZ + XWZY)$$

is not trace-positive.

That is why, we will consider non commutative liftings of the deshomogenized form  $q$  by setting  $w = 1$ . Let

$$Q = 1 + X^2 Y^2 + X^2 Z^2 + Y^2 Z^2 - 4XYZ.$$

Note that we may also have considered the symmetrized version

$$1 + X^2 Y^2 + X^2 Z^2 + Y^2 Z^2 - 2(XYZ + XZY)$$

but it has same trace on triples of symmetric matrices since  $\text{Tr}(ABC) = \text{Tr}(ACB)$  for all triple  $(A, B, C)$  of *symmetric* matrices.

Let us see how to study the trace-positivity of  $Q$ .

**3.1. Arithmetico-geometric inequality.** Since it is not an algebraic certificat, it seems that we cannot derive any non trivial result about trace-positivity. The only thing which is clear is the trace-positivity of  $Q$  evaluated at a triple of commuting matrices  $(A, B, C)$ . In that case  $(A, B, C)$  are simultaneously diagonalizable and we are reduced to the commutative case.

**3.2. Trace-positivity for contractions.** The identity for commutative polynomials can be lifted in  $\mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z \rangle$  to

$$Q \sim (XY - Z)(XY - Z)^* + (XZ - Y)(XZ - Y)^* - (1 - Y^2)(1 - Z^2),$$

which proves the Trace-positivity when  $Y^2 - 1, Z^2 - 1$  are both positive semi-definite or both negative semi-definite matrices. To see this, we recall the well known elementary result (we recall a proof for the convenience of reader) which we will need also in the following:

**Lemma 3.2.** *If  $A$  and  $B$  are two positive semi-definite symmetric matrices in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ , then  $\text{tr}(AB) \geq 0$ .*

*Proof.* By density, one may assume that  $A$  is positive-definite. Hence, the quadratic forms defined by  $A$  and  $B$  are simultaneously diagonalizable : i.e. there is some matrix  $U$  in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$  such that  $A = U^T U$  and  $B = U^T D U$  where  $D$  is a diagonal matrix whose entries are non-negative.

We get  $AB = U^T U U^T D U$  which is similar to  $U U^T D U U^T = V V^T$  where  $V = U U^T \sqrt{D}$ . Thus,  $AB$  is similar to a positive semi-definite matrix and hence trace-positive.  $\square$

Namely, we get the trace-positivity of  $Q$  when all eigenvalues of both  $Y$  and  $Z$  are in  $[-1, 1]$  ( $Y$  and  $Z$  are both contractions) or are both not in  $[-1, 1]$ .

**3.3. Substitution with odd powers.** Another possibility would be to show that  $Q(X^3, Y^3, Z^3)$  is cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares. The commutative collapse of  $Q$  is surely a sum of squares as said, for instance, by the computer algebra system SOSTOOLS. Unfortunately, it is not clear how to obtain a "simple" identity that might be liftable in  $\mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z \rangle$ .

Another way to handle would be to use the Non-commutative version of computer programm dealing with hermitian squares. Such a device has been developped in [CKP].

For instance, concerning the non-commutative Motzkin polynomial, such a certificate has been given by K. Cafuta for the Motzkin polynomial  $M$  (see [Bu]) which gives another way of proving that it is trace positive.

In our situation the computer programm did not complete to show if  $Q(X^3, Y^3, Z^3)$  is cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares (due to the awesome number of monomials to handle: about 1093 !).

**3.4. Identity with simple denominator.** Remember the commutative identity that we have previously considered:

$$q(x, y, z)(1 + x^2) = (1 - xyz)^2 + (yz - x)^2 + (x^2y - xz)^2 + (x^2z - xy)^2.$$

Then, let us define the following non-commutative liftings:

$$\begin{cases} F_1 &= 1 - XYZ \\ F_2 &= YZ - X, \\ F_3 &= X^2Y - XZ \\ F_4 &= X^2Z - XY. \end{cases}$$

and

$$R = \sum_{i=1}^4 F_i(X, Y, Z) F_i^*(X, Y, Z).$$

Let also  $Q_1 = 1 + YZ^2Y + XZ^2X + XY^2X - XYZ - ZYX - XZY - YZX$ . Then,

$$(1) \quad Q_1(1 + X^2) = \sum_{i=1}^4 F_i F_i^* + \sum_{i=1}^5 U_i$$

where

$$\begin{cases} U_1 &= X^2ZYX - ZYX^3, \\ U_2 &= X^2YZX - YZX^3, \\ U_3 &= YZ^2YX^2 - XYZ^2YX, \\ U_4 &= XZ^2X^3 - X^2Z^2X^2, \\ U_5 &= XY^2X^3 - X^2Y^2X^2. \end{cases}$$

Before stating the result about our main example, we will need the following

**Lemma 3.3.** *Let  $u_1 = X^{a_1}vX^{b_1}$  and  $u_2 = X^{a_2}vX^{b_2}$  where  $v \in \mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z \rangle$  and  $a_1 + b_1 = a_2 + b_2$ .*

*Then, for all univariate polynomial  $w \in \mathbb{R}\langle X \rangle$ , we have  $u_1w \sim u_2w$ .*

*Proof.* By linearity, it is enough to show that, for all  $c \in \mathbb{N}$ , we have  $u_1X^c \sim u_2X^c$ . This is obvious since  $u_iX^c \sim vX^{a_i+b_i+c}$  for  $i = 1, 2$ .  $\square$

We deduce the trace-positivity of  $Q$  but also the locus where  $\text{Tr}(Q)$  vanishes:

**Theorem 3.4.** *The polynomial  $Q$  is trace-positive but not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares.*

*Moreover  $\text{Tr}(Q(A, B, C)) = 0$  if and only if  $A = \text{Diag}(a_i)_{1 \leq i \leq d}$ ,  $B = \text{Diag}(b_i)_{1 \leq i \leq d}$ ,  $C = \text{Diag}(c_i)_{1 \leq i \leq d}$  where all the  $a_i$ 's,  $b_i$ 's and  $c_i$ 's are in  $\{-1, +1\}$  and such that  $a_i b_i c_i = 1$  for all  $i$ .*

*Proof.* The polynomial  $Q$  is clearly not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares otherwise its commutative collapse and also  $q$  would be a sum of squares in  $\mathbb{R}[x, y, z]$ , which is not the case.

In equation (1), let us substitute  $(X, Y, Z)$  by a triple of symmetric matrices  $(A, B, C)$  in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ . Then,

$$Q_1(A, B, C)(\text{Id} + A^2) = \sum_{i=1}^4 F_i(A, B, C) F_i^*(A, B, C) + \sum_{i=1}^5 U_i(A, B, C).$$

Since  $\text{Id} + A^2$  is invertible and  $(\text{Id} + A^2)^{-1}$  is a polynomial in  $A$ , we get by Lemma 3.3,

$$\text{Tr} \left( \sum_{i=1}^5 U_i(A, B, C) \times (\text{Id} + A^2)^{-1} \right) = 0.$$

Hence,

$$(2) \quad \text{Tr}(Q_1(A, B, C)) = \text{Tr} \left( \left( \sum_{i=1}^4 F_i(A, B, C) F_i^*(A, B, C) \right) \times (\text{Id} + A^2)^{-1} \right)$$

which is non negative by Lemma 3.2 since  $\sum_{i=1}^4 F_i(A, B, C) F_i^*(A, B, C)$  is positive semi-definite and  $(\text{Id} + A^2)^{-1}$  is positive definite.

This shows the trace-positivity of  $Q$  since  $\text{Tr}(Q(A, B, C)) = \text{Tr}(Q_1(A, B, C))$  for all triple  $(A, B, C)$  of symmetric matrices (although  $Q$  and  $Q_1$  are not cyclically equivalent).

The identity (2) gives also the locus where  $\text{Tr}(Q)$  vanishes. Indeed, if  $\text{Tr}(Q(A, B, C)) = 0$ , then for all  $i$ ,  $\text{Tr}(F_i(A, B, C) F_i^*(A, B, C)) = 0$  which means that  $F_i(A, B, C) = 0$ . From this, one easily deduce that  $A, B, C$  are invertible and commute. The result follows.  $\square$

#### 4. SOME OTHER EXAMPLES

We may use the techniques given in Section 3.4 to produce other examples of trace-positive but not sum of hermitian squares.

**4.1. Another deshomogenization of  $Q_0$ .** We choose now to deshomogenize  $Q_0$  by setting  $X = 1$ :

$$\tilde{Q}(Y, Z, W) = W^4 + Y^2 + Z^2 + Y^2 Z^2 - 4YZW.$$

Let us define the non-commutative liftings:

$$\begin{cases} G_1 &= W^3 - YZ \\ G_2 &= WYZ - W^2 \\ G_3 &= Y - WZ \\ G_4 &= Z - WY. \end{cases}$$

and also  $S = \sum_{i=1}^4 G_i(Y, Z, W) G_i^*(Y, Z, W)$ .

Let us define also  $Q_2 = W^4 + Y^2 + Z^2 + YZ^2Y - 2(YZW + ZYW)$ . Then,

$$Q_2(1 + W^2) = S + \sum_{i=1}^7 V_i$$

where

$$\begin{cases} V_1 &= -YZW + WYZ, \\ V_2 &= -ZYW + WZY, \\ V_3 &= -YZW^3 + WYZW^2, \\ V_4 &= -2ZYW^3 + W^3ZY + W^2ZYW, \\ V_5 &= Y^2W^2 - WY^2W, \\ V_6 &= Z^2W^2 - WZ^2W, \\ V_7 &= YZ^2YW^2 - WYZ^2YW. \end{cases}$$



**Proposition 4.1.** *The polynomial  $\tilde{Q}$  is trace-positive but not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares.*

*Proof.* We proceed as in the proof of Theorem 3.4.

Since  $(\text{Id} + D^2)^{-1}$  is a polynomial in  $D$ , we get by Lemma 3.3,

$$\text{Tr} \left( \sum_{i=1}^6 V_i(A, B, C) \times (\text{Id} + D^2)^{-1} \right) = 0.$$

Hence

$$\text{Tr}(Q_2(B, C, D)) = \text{Tr} \left( \left( \sum_{i=1}^4 G_i(B, C, D) G_i^*(B, C, D) \right) \times (\text{Id} + D^2)^{-1} \right)$$

which is non negative since  $\sum_{i=1}^4 G_i(B, C, D) G_i^*(B, C, D)$  is positive semi-definite and  $(\text{Id} + D^2)^{-1}$  is positive definite.

This concludes the proof since  $\text{Tr}(\tilde{Q}(A, B, C)) = \text{Tr}(Q_2(A, B, C))$  for all triple  $(A, B, C)$  of symmetric matrices.  $\square$

For convenience, one may introduce the following notation, for  $u \in \mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z, W \rangle$ :

$$\mathcal{C}_u^0 = \{v \in \mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z, W \rangle \mid \forall k \in \mathbb{N}, vu^k \sim 0\}.$$

With this notation, Lemma 3.3 says that  $X^{a_1}vX^{b_1} - X^{a_2}vX^{b_2} \in \mathcal{C}_X^0$  where  $v \in \mathbb{R}\langle X, Y, Z \rangle$  and  $a_1 + b_1 = a_2 + b_2$ .

**4.2. The Motzkin polynymial.** It is already known that

$$M = 1 + X^2Y^4 + Y^2X^4 - 6X^2Y^2.$$

is trace-positive but not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares. See [Bu] for several different proofs.

Proceeding as in section 3.4, one can give an alternate algebraic certificate to show that  $M$  is trace-positive. Indeed, we start with the commutative identity

$$(z^6 + x^2y^4 + y^2x^4 - 3x^2y^2z^2)(x^2 + z^2) = (z^4 - x^2y^2)^2 + (x^3y - xyz^2)^2 + (xy^2z - xz^3)^2.$$

and one can show that it is possible to derive a non-commutative identity of the form

$$M(1+X^2) - ((1 - X^2Y^2)(1 - X^2Y^2)^* + (X^3Y - XY)(X^3Y - XY)^* + (XY^2 - X)(XY^2 - X)^*) \in \mathcal{C}_X^0.$$

Likewise, one can show that

$$\tilde{M} = Z^6 + Y^4 + Y^2 - 3Y^2Z^2$$

is trace-positive by given an algebraic certificate of the form

$$\tilde{M}(1+Z^2) - ((Z^4 - Y^2)(Z^4 - Y^2)^* + (Y - Z^2Y)(Y - Z^2Y)^* + (ZY^2 - Z^3)(ZY^2 - Z^3)^*) \in \mathcal{C}_Z^0.$$

*Remark 4.2.* One may would like to try the same technique for some (homogeneous) form. Let us consider for instance  $M_0 = Z^6 + X^2Y^4 + Y^2X^4 - 6X^2Y^2Z^2$ . Namely, we are searching for an identity of the form

$$M_0(X^2 + Z^2) = \sum_{i=1}^3 P_i P_i^* + M_{C^0}$$

with the additional condition  $M_{C^0} \in \mathcal{C}_{X^2+Y^2}^0$ . This last condition, means  $M_{C^0} \times (X^2 + Z^2)^k \sim 0$  for any integer  $k$  and it seems difficult to satisfy if.

## 5. TOWARDS SOME NON-COMMUTATIVE HOMOGENEOUS EXAMPLES

**5.1. Degree bounds Conjecture.** One may want to construct examples of (homogeneous) non-commutative forms which are trace-positive but not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares. We will see that it is possible when assuming the so-called *degree bounds* conjecture. The latter can be stated as the following:

**Conjecture 5.1** (Degree bounds conjecture). For all integer  $g$ , there is an integer  $d = d(g, n)$  such that: any polynomial  $P \in \mathbb{R}\langle X_1, \dots, X_n \rangle$  of degree  $g$  is trace-positive if and only if  $\text{Tr}(P(A_1, \dots, A_n)) \geq 0$  for all symmetric matrices  $A_1, \dots, A_n$  in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ .

Let us mention that this conjecture is related to the algebraic formulation of Connes's embedding conjecture as formulated in [KS].

Here are some elementary known cases when the degree bounds conjecture is true:

- (1) When  $g = 2$ , we have  $d(2, n) = 1$ . Moreover in that case a trace-positive polynomial is cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares.
- (2) When  $g = 4$  and  $n = 2$  we have  $d(4, 2) = 2$  (see [BK]). Moreover in that case a trace-positive polynomial is cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares.

Furthermore, If a polynomial is cyclically sorted in 2 variables, it is trace-positive if and only if its commutative collapse is positive, namely it is enough to check trace-positivity for matrices of size 1.

Moreover, because of polynomial identities [Ro], one has some lower bound for  $d(g, n)$ . For instance, there exists a polynomial of degree 4 in 4 variables which vanishes on any 4-tuple of symmetric matrices in  $\mathbb{R}^{2 \times 2}$ . Hence, even for quaternary quartics, it is necessary to check trace-positivity at least on  $3 \times 3$  matrices, namely  $d(4, 4) \geq 3$ .

Assuming the degree bounds Conjecture, let us see how to construct some examples of trace-positive forms which are not sums of hermitian squares.

We need an identity about commutative forms coming from [Ve, (1.13) and section 3]:

**Proposition 5.2.** *The form  $q_\eta$  is positive-semi-definite but not a sum of squares for any  $\eta$  such that  $0 \leq \eta < \eta_0$  where  $\sqrt{\eta_0}$  is the smallest positive root of  $s^3 - \frac{1}{2}s + \frac{1}{9} = 0$  ( $\sqrt{\eta_0} \sim 0.25$ ). Further,*

$$q_{\eta_0} = (w^2 - \sqrt{\eta_0}(x^2 + y^2 + z^2))^2 + \frac{2}{9\sqrt{\eta_0}} (3\sqrt{\eta_0}wx - yz)^2 + (3\sqrt{\eta_0}wy - zx)^2 + (3\sqrt{\eta_0}wz - xy)^2.$$

Let us consider the following non-commutative liftings:

$$\begin{aligned} H_0 &= W^2 - \sqrt{\eta_0}(X^2 + Y^2 + Z^2) \\ H_1 &= 3\sqrt{\eta_0}WX - YZ & K_1 &= 3\sqrt{\eta_0}XW - YZ \\ H_2 &= 3\sqrt{\eta_0}WY - XZ & K_2 &= 3\sqrt{\eta_0}YW - XZ \\ H_3 &= 3\sqrt{\eta_0}WZ - XY & K_3 &= 3\sqrt{\eta_0}ZW - XY \end{aligned}$$

and

$$Q_{\eta_0} = H_0^*H_0 + \frac{1}{9\sqrt{\eta_0}}(H_1^*H_1 + K_1^*K_1 + H_2^*H_2 + K_2^*K_2 + H_3^*H_3 + K_3^*K_3)$$

and finally

$$Q_{\eta} = Q_{\eta_0} + (\eta - \eta_0)(X^4 + Y^4 + Z^4).$$

Remark that  $Q_{\eta}$  is also cyclically equivalent to the following polynomial

$$\begin{aligned} Q_{\eta} &\sim W^4 + \eta(X^4 + Y^4 + Z^4) + \left(2\eta_0 + \frac{2}{9\sqrt{\eta_0}}\right)(X^2Y^2 + X^2Z^2 + Y^2Z^2) \\ &\quad - \frac{2}{3}(XYZW + XYWZ + XZYW + XZWY + XWYZ + XWZY). \end{aligned}$$

We have

**Proposition 5.3.** *Let us assume that the degree bounds conjecture 5.1 hold true for polynomials of degree 4 in 4 variables.*

*Then, there is an  $\eta \in ]0, \eta_0[$  such that  $Q_{\eta}$  is trace-positive but not a sum of hermitian squares.*

*Proof.* Following the notations of 5.1, let us set  $d = d(4, 4)$ .

Since  $Q_{\eta_0}$  is trace-positive (it is a sum of hermitian squares), it is trace-positive on matrices of size  $d$ .

First of all, note that the only roots of  $Q_{\eta_0}$  are trivial. Indeed, let  $(A, B, C, D)$  be a quadruple of symmetric matrices in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$  which is a root of  $Q_{\eta_0}$ . Since  $F_i(A, B, C, D) = 0$  and  $G_i(A, B, C, D) = 0$  for all  $i = 1, 2, 3$ , all the matrices  $A, B, C, D$  pairwise commute ; they are simultaneously diagonalizable. Since  $q_{\eta_0}$  has only trivial roots, we deduce that  $A = B = C = D = 0$ .

Let

$$S^d = \{(A, B, C, D) \in (\mathcal{S}\mathbb{R}^{d \times d})^4 \mid \text{Tr}(A^4 + B^4 + C^4 + D^4) = 1\},$$

where  $\mathcal{S}\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$  denotes the set of all symmetric matrices in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ .

The set  $S^d$  is a compact set, and since  $\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0})$  does not vanish, we have on  $S^d$

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}) \geq \epsilon > 0.$$

Thus, for all  $(A, B, C, D) \in S^d$ :

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D)) - \epsilon \text{Tr}(A^4 + B^4 + C^4 + D^4) \geq 0,$$

and hence for all  $(A, B, C, D) \in \mathcal{S}\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D) - \epsilon(A^4 + B^4 + C^4)) \geq 0.$$

In other words  $Q_{\eta_0-\epsilon}(X, Y, Z, W)$  is trace-positive since we have assumed the degree bounds conjecture. Furthermore, it is not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares since  $q_{\eta_0-\epsilon}$  is not a sum of squares because of Proposition 5.2.  $\square$

*Remark 5.4.* Let us define the sequence of real numbers  $m_k = \inf_{S^k} \text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0})$ . Then, the decreasing sequence  $(m_k)_{k \in \mathbb{N}}$  is stationary if we have the degree bounds conjecture. By contraposition, if the sequence  $(m_k)_{k \in \mathbb{N}}$  were not stationary, then it would give a counterexample to the degree bounds conjecture (for the trace-positivity of  $R_{\eta_0}$ ).

**5.2. General procedure.** Let  $p$  be a commutative form of degree  $2d$  in the variables  $x_1, \dots, x_n$ . Assume that  $p$  is positive but not a sum of squares in  $\mathbb{R}[x_1, \dots, x_n]$ .

A result by Robinson ([Ro]) says that for a high enough real number  $\eta$ , the form  $p + \eta(x_1^{2d} + \dots + x_n^{2d})$  is a sum of squares. Hence,

$$q_\eta = p + \eta \left( \sum_{1 \leq i \leq n} x_i^{2d} + \sum_{1 \leq i, j \leq n} x_i^{2d-2} x_j^2 \right)$$

is a sum of squares in  $\mathbb{R}[x_1, \dots, x_n]$ . Let us consider  $\eta_0$  the minimal real number such that  $q_{\eta_0}$  is a sum of squares. Let us write

$$q_{\eta_0} = \sum_{i=1}^r f_i^2.$$

There is some  $f_k$  which can be written as

$$f_k = a_k x_1^d + b_k x_1^{d-2} x_2^2 + g_k$$

or

$$f_k = c_k x_1^{d-1} x_2 + h_k$$

where  $a_k, b_k, c_k$  are non zero real numbers and the monomials in  $g_k$  and  $h_k$  have lexicographic ordering lower than the  $x_1^{d-2} x_2^2$  or  $x_1^{d-1} x_2$  respectively.

Let us consider the non-commutative liftings:

$$\begin{cases} F_{k,1} &= a_k X_1^d + b_k X_1^{d-2} X_2^2 + G_k \\ F_{k,2} &= a_k X_1^d + b_k X_2^2 X_1^{d-2} + G_k \end{cases}$$

or

$$\begin{cases} F_{k,1} &= c_k X_1^{d-1} X_2 + H_k \\ F_{k,2} &= c_k X_2 X_1^{d-1} + H_k \end{cases}$$

where  $G_k$  and  $H_k$  are any liftings of  $g_k$  and  $h_k$ .

And we repeat the same lifting procedure for any couple of indexes  $(i, j)$  in place of  $(1, 2)$ .

Then, after a suitable averaging, we get an identity

$$P_{\eta_0} = \sum_{k=1}^s F_k F_k^* \sim P + \eta_0 \left( \sum_{1 \leq i \leq n} X_i^{2d} + \sum_{1 \leq i, j \leq n} X_i^{2d-2} X_j^2 \right)$$

where  $P$  is a non-commutative lifting of  $p$ .

Then, the argument in the proof of 5.3 follows readily. Indeed, the equalities  $F_{k,1}(A_1, \dots, A_n) = F_{k,2}(A_1, \dots, A_n) = 0$  imply that  $A_1^{d-2}$  and  $A_2^2$  commutes. Hence  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  commutes. And likewise for any couple of matrices.

Hence, assuming the degree bounds Conjecture, one may conclude that there exists some  $0 < \eta < \eta_0$  such that  $P_\eta$  is trace-positive but not cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares.

**5.3. Uniform approximation of operators.** To avoid the use of 5.1, one may try to proceed by approximation.

For any square matrix  $M = (m_{i,j})_{1 \leq i,j \leq d} \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ , we consider the normalized euclidean (or Hilbert-Schmidt) norm

$$\|M\| = \sqrt{\frac{1}{d} \sum_{i,j=1}^d a_{i,j}^2} = \sqrt{\text{Tr}(M^*M)},$$

where  $M^*$  denotes the transposed of  $M$ .

Roughly speaking, the idea is the following : if  $\text{Tr}(R_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D))$  is small for a quadruple of symmetric matrices in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$  then, by the triangular inequality, we deduce that all the commutators  $[A, B]$ ,  $[A, C]$  and  $[B, C]$  are small. Hence, one would like to approximate the quadruple  $(A, B, C, D)$  by a pairwise commuting quadruple  $(\tilde{A}, \tilde{B}, \tilde{C}, \tilde{D})$ . Noticing that  $q_{\eta_0}$  never vanishes, we have

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(\tilde{A}, \tilde{B}, \tilde{C}, \tilde{D})) \geq m > 0$$

where

$$m = \inf_{\{x^4+y^4+z^4+w^4=1\}} q_{\eta_0}(x, y, z, w).$$

If  $\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D))$  were close enough to  $\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(\tilde{A}, \tilde{B}, \tilde{C}, \tilde{D}))$  by approximation, we would get a contradiction showing that  $\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0})$  is bounded from below on  $S^d$ .

The problem we face is that we need an uniformity with respect to the dimension  $d$ .

There is a deep approximation result by Lin ([Ln]) but with respect to the operator norm which is denoted by  $\|M\|_{\text{op}}$  and is equal to the supremum of the eigenvalues of  $M^*M$ .

In the same spirit, but maybe more accurate for our purpose on trace-positivity there is a recent result by Glebsky ([Gy]) dealing with normalized Hilbert-Schmidt norm:

**Theorem 5.5** (Glebsky). *Let  $\delta > 0$ . There is  $\epsilon = \epsilon(\delta, k)$  for any  $k \in \mathbb{N}$ , such that if  $\|[A_i, A_j]\| \leq \epsilon$  for symmetric matrices  $A_1, \dots, A_k$  in  $\mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$  with  $\|A_i\|_{\text{op}} \leq 1$ , then there exist pairwise commuting symmetric matrices  $B_1, \dots, B_k$  such that  $\|B_j - A_j\| \leq \delta$  and  $\|B_i\|_{\text{op}} \leq 1$ .*

Unfortunately, we did not succeed to use this result because of the assumption (natural but not convenient for our example) that the operators should be bounded for the operator norm. For the moment, we only have the partial result:

**Proposition 5.6.** *For any positive real number  $M$ , there exists  $\eta > 0$  such that  $Q_\eta$  is non cyclically equivalent to a sum of hermitian squares but trace-positive on any quadruple of symmetric operators whose operator norm is bounded by  $M$ .*

*Proof.* Let

$$S_{1,M}^d = \{(A, B, C, D) \in S\mathbb{R}^{d \times d} \mid \|A\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, \|B\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, \|C\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, \|D\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, \|X^2\|^2 + \|Y^2\|^2 + \|Z^2\|^2 + \|W^2\|^2 = 1\}.$$

Note that  $\text{Tr}(A^4 + B^4 + C^4 + D^4) = \|A^2\|^2 + \|B^2\|^2 + \|C^2\|^2 + \|D^2\|^2$ .

And let

$$B_{M,3/2}^d = \{(A, B, C, D) \in S\mathbb{R}^{d \times d} \mid \|A\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, \|B\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, \|C\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, \|D\|_{\text{op}} \leq M, 1/2 \leq \text{Tr}(A^4 + B^4 + C^4 + D^4) \leq 3/2\}.$$

We argue by contradiction. Assume that, for all  $\epsilon > 0$ , there are  $d$  and  $(A, B, C, D) \in S_{1,M}^d$ , such that

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D)) < \epsilon.$$

Then,

$$\frac{1}{9\sqrt{\eta_0}} \text{Tr}(F_i^* F_i)(A, B, C, D) < \epsilon$$

and

$$\frac{1}{9\sqrt{\eta_0}} \text{Tr}(G_i^* G_i)(A, B, C, D) < \epsilon$$

for all  $i = 1, 2, 3$ .

The triangular inequality gives, up to resizing the  $\epsilon$  :

$$\|[B, C]\| = \|BC - CB\| \leq \|BC - 3\sqrt{\eta_0}DA\| + \|3\sqrt{\eta_0}DA - CB\| < 2\epsilon$$

and likewise for the other commutators.

Since we have assumed that  $A, B, C, D \in S_{1,M}^d$  have operator norms less than  $M$ , we may use Theorem 5.5 : there are pairwise commuting  $A', B', C', D'$  whose operator norm are less than  $M$  and such that

$$\begin{cases} \|A' - A\| \leq \sqrt{M}\delta, \\ \|B' - B\| \leq \sqrt{M}\delta, \\ \|C' - C\| \leq \sqrt{M}\delta, \\ \|D' - D\| \leq \sqrt{M}\delta. \end{cases}$$

In particular, we may assume that  $A', B', C', D' \in B_{3/2}^d$  up to resizing  $\delta$ .

We have the uniform continuity of  $\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0})$  on the compact  $B_{3/2,M}^d$  with respect to the Hilbert-Schmidt norm, moreover this is also uniform with respect to the dimension  $d$ . Namely, there is a constant  $K(M)$  only depending on  $M$  such that if  $(A', B', C', D') \in B_{3/2,M}^d$  and  $(A, B, C, D) \in B_{3/2,M}^d$  are such that  $\|A' - A\| \leq \delta$ ,  $\|B' - B\| \leq \delta$ ,  $\|C' - C\| \leq \delta$  and  $\|D' - D\| \leq \delta$ , then

$$|\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0})(A', B', C', D') - \text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0})(A, B, C, D)| \leq K(M)\delta.$$

From all this, we deduce, for small enough  $\delta$ , that

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D)) \geq \text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A', B', C', D')) - m/2.$$

Since  $A', B', C', D'$  commute, we have  $\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A', B', C', D')) \geq m$ . Then,

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D)) \geq m/2,$$

a contradiction.

We have shown the existence of some  $\epsilon > 0$  such that for all  $d$  and  $(A, B, C, D) \in S_{1,M}^d$ , we have

$$\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0}(A, B, C, D)) \geq \epsilon.$$

Hence,  $\text{Tr}(Q_{\eta_0-\epsilon}(A, B, C, D)) \geq 0$  for all quadruple  $(A, B, C, D)$  of symmetric matrices whose operator norm is bounded by  $M$ .  $\square$

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